Necessary Distraction

Painting Show

Free Entry

Lisa Reihana
8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art
New Zealand focus issue
Slow burn

Robyn Backen’s ‘If you do not speak, do I speak for you?’

On a wet weekday afternoon in September 1984, the Mayor of Wollongong opened the Council’s new incinerator before 60 guests. Although the incinerator replaced an open tip at the portentously named Flat Rock Gully, its approval had been disputed. The contract was awarded to the Reverberatory Incinerator and Engineering Company (RIECO), which collaborated with the architect Walter Burley Griffin and his associate Eric Nichols in constructing 12 incinerators, six of which have survived as architectural monuments with renewed functions. As RIECO’s side denotes, one of its innovations was to reverberate the incinerator’s functions: its heat was reflected for other purposes, including the sterilization of sanitary pans.

Reverberation is also a capable term for the history of the Wollongong Incinerator. The opposition to its construction resurfaced in the mid-1970s in a wish to demolish it; the past disposal of refuse was counterposed when the building became a restaurant, its oven appealing 1980s patrons. The incinerator itself was consumed by fire before it was reinstalled finally as a Council art space. In September this year it was one of the hosts of the inaugural Wollongong Visual Arts Biennial. Its theme, ‘Imagining Place’, was an especially fertile one for the building, and the sculptor and installation artist Robyn Backen was invited to reside to the site, working with curator Venita Poblocki and mentoring local artist Sarah Fitzgerald.

The Wollongong Incinerator steps down the side of an embankment in a series of skylit bays: like the digestive system, it was fed at the top floor, and the garbage fell through chutes until incineration was completed and its residue discharged as ash, re-used purely for road base. Backen’s installation took place in the building’s lower floor, where incineration occurred before the residue was released into a quenching chamber. The installation began with quotations from the American physicist Richard Feynman, who described the phenomenon of fire in a way that combined theoretical sophistication with anomic undercurrents. Atoms of oxygen ‘would prefer to be closer’ to those of carbon in wood, and with sufficient stimulation the atoms ‘bump against each other’, they ‘jiggle faster and faster’ and ‘snap together’. The result of this feverish exchange is fire. The quotations from Feynman moved across an introductory screen until the text itself became smothered, breaking apart before reforming into words.

Backen’s selection of quotations suggested her interest in fire as a form of motion; the components of her installation were volatile – they jiggled and reverberated with each other and the building. Private thoughts and public forces were also interviewed. For some visitors, her quotations from Feynman may have ‘snapped together’ with the analysis of Griffin’s incinerators made by his wife and fellow architect Marion Mahony Griffin. Feynman contributed to the Manhattan Project’s development of the atomic bomb, and after the Second World War Marion Griffin identified the Pyrmont Incinerator as a unique record of twentieth-century civilization, one that had been emphasised by the ‘smouldering of the atom’. Its strange exalted terms she specified the metaphysical qualities of the incinerator’s ornament, the record of what remains when matter is destroyed.

Poised within the room was a slender tower; constructed by Backen as a type of furnace. We were permitted to enter and borrow its privacy, but the enclosure was permeable, like the womb, to disembodied voices, and the question ‘If you do not speak, do I speak for you?’ was heard. Voiced by different speakers, it was repeated as an incantation to bring forth a reaction. The internal walls of the chamber were alive to our presence and captured the sound of any movement or word.

The sounds were recorded on ‘burnt’, as Backen phrased it, so their residue was kept. The experience within this dark tower resembled the initial step made by alchemists, the blackening or nigredo stage that began purification by slow fire, associated psychologically with releasing the rotten matter of falseness.

On leaving the tower, we may have observed a silent film playing on a shelf of space above us. Within this context, the repetition of its screening recalled the behaviour of fire: it splattered, seated itself and disappeared before flaring again to life. The archival film promoted the secluded estate in Sydney’s Middle Harbour designed as a model suburb by Griffin. Occupying an elevated position, the film’s figures appeared like distant spirits, ephemeral in their renewal from the room’s machinery and untroubled by the routines of refuse and its disposal. The excerpt recorded a dance performed on an arm of land, surrounded by the wooded forebears of Middle Cove. Dressed in improvised Arabian costumes, the dancers evoked the fairytale exotics of the ballet Scheherazade; at the same time, they bumped against our awareness of contemporary politics and jiggled towards another reaction.


Robyn Backen’s ‘If you do not speak, do I speak for you?’ was exhibited at the Incinerator Art Space, Sydney, as part of the Wollongong Visual Arts Biennial 2015, ‘Imagining Place’, 5–26 September 2015.

John Murphy, Sydney
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